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# First record of Blackstart *Cercomela melanura* for Burkina Faso

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**Première mention du Traquet à queue noire *Cercomela melanura* pour le Burkina Faso.** Le 19–21 août 2011, deux Traquets à queue noire *Cercomela melanura* ont été observés sur un inselberg dans le Département de Tankougounadié, à l'est du Burkina Faso, près de la frontière avec le Niger. Le Traquet à queue noire étant généralement considéré comme un résident avec un faible potentiel de dispersion, et vu l'habitat apparemment approprié de la zone, qui est à proximité de l'aire de distribution connue de l'espèce, cette observation indique qu'il s'agit d'une extension de l'aire de distribution plutôt que d'une occurrence occasionnelle.

In the late afternoon of 19 August 2011, I heard an unfamiliar birdsong on an inselberg in remote Tankougounadié Department, eastern Burkina Faso, near the Niger border. It was produced by a drab, pale greyish-brown, slender chat-like bird with a very distinctive all-black tail, which I identified as a Blackstart *Cercomela melanura*. Familiar Chat *C. familiaris*, probably the most likely species with which Blackstart could be confused in the same area, can be eliminated by its rufous rump and tail.

On the following two days a second bird was also seen briefly. At first the two birds appeared to be paired, as they shared the same lookout, and they were not observed in agonistic behaviour (although one chased a Familiar Chat). However, shortly after seeing the two birds together, what were presumably the same two were heard in almost exactly the same spot (Collar 2005 states that only males sing). However, on this occasion, I could not be sure that both individuals sang, and if 'full' song was involved. The birds were very active, often flying to the ground to catch insects from a bush or rock. They often spread and

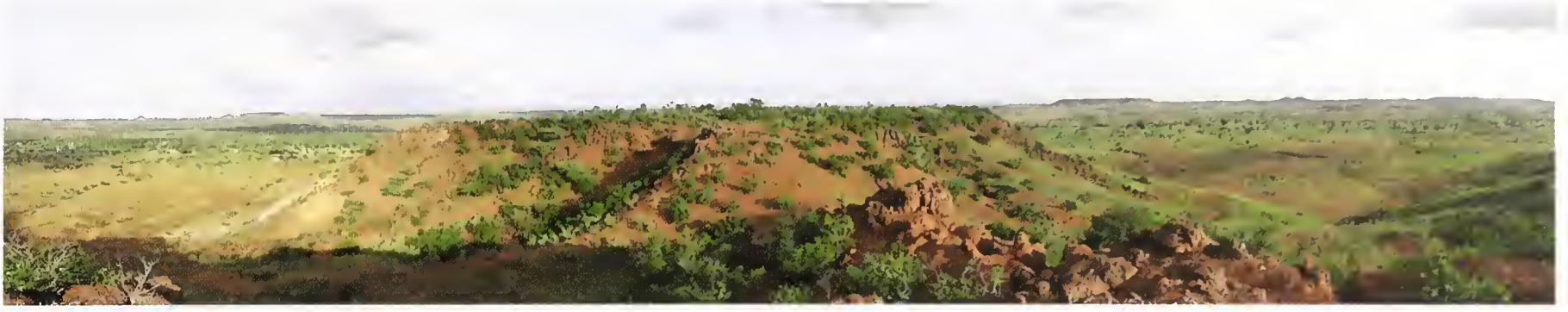
flicked their tails and lowered their half-folded wings. Although the birds were often difficult to locate, they did not appear to move far. All sightings were made within a 150-m radius and, despite searching, no Blackstarts were seen over the rest of the fairly large inselberg. The habitat in the vicinity of the observation was typical of the species based on the literature (Cramp 1988, Keith *et al.* 1992, Borrow & Demey 2001).

After consulting various sources (e.g., Atkinson *et al.* 2007–11) my initial thoughts were confirmed: my observations represented the first record of Blackstart for Burkina Faso.

Blackstart is an uncommon to locally (fairly) common, and patchily distributed, resident restricted to the Middle East and northern parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Israel, Oman, Somalia and (eastern) Mali form the northern, eastern, southern and western limits of its known breeding range. The species' nearest known breeding areas to Burkina Faso are in eastern Mali and western Niger, close to the Burkina Faso border (Cramp 1988, Collar 2005). Records outside its breeding range are very few, although occasional



**Figures 1–2.** Blackstarts / Traquets à queue noire *Cercomela melanura*, Tankougounadié Department, Burkina Faso, 20 August 2011 (Michiel van den Bergh)



**Figure 3.** Location of sighting, Tankougounadié Department, Burkina Faso, 20 August 2011 (Michiel van den Bergh)  
Le site de l'observation, Département de Tankougounadié, Burkina Faso, 20 août 2011 (Michiel van den Bergh)

observations in, e.g., Nigeria and The Gambia suggest some winter dispersal (Collar 2005), and the species has recently been reported in southern Turkey in autumn (Cofta *et al.* 2005). Furthermore, Keith *et al.* (1992) list vagrant records from Syria and Kuwait, and indicate that the species is possibly only a summer visitor to parts of Egypt. According to Cramp (1988) some dispersal can be expected in view of its propensity for arid habitats.

Six subspecies are generally recognised, of which the birds in Burkina Faso presumably belonged to the subspecies *C. m. ultima*, which otherwise breeds in eastern Mali and western Niger. However, *ultima* is considered to be only doubtfully distinct from *C. m. airensis* (of northern Niger east to central Sudan), although it is reportedly darker and browner (Keith *et al.* 1992, Collar 2005). Both birds in Burkina Faso had dark brown flight feathers, rather than black, as described for *ultima* by Borrow & Demey (2001), although feather wear or bleaching could have been responsible for this. Interestingly, one of the two was much paler and browner, and also had a cinnamon wash to its ear-coverts and upper breast, and some cinnamon on the nape (*cf.* Fig. 1). Keith *et al.* (1992) indicate that juveniles of all races are like adults, but browner and with a creamy breast (as was visible on this bird). However, Borrow & Demey (2004) and Keith *et al.* (1992) also suggest that juveniles have pale tips and broader pale fringes to the wing-coverts and tertials, unlike the Burkina Faso bird. Also, the potential juvenile showed active moult but had many worn feathers, while Cramp (1988) notes that in *airensis* post-juvenile moult has been noted in mid July. The bird did not show any (remnants) of yellow gape flanges. The possibility exists that the pale cinnamon coloration was due to soil discoloration, although if this was the case, it is surprising that the colour was so confined in extent.

The apparently suitable habitat, very close to the species' known breeding range, makes the presence of Blackstart in this region relatively unsurprising. Further exploration should reveal whether a breeding population is present. Collar (2005: 791) thought that 'although records in Nigeria and Gambia (outside known breeding range) [can be] interpreted as vagrancy, it is thought possible that they represent local populations at extremely low density'.

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